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SRI LANKA

SNAPSHOT

Helping Youth Leaders Counter Hate

Bringing together youth leaders from around the country to learn, connect, and develop an inclusive Sri Lankan identity.



Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim youth representing all of Sri Lanka's 25 districts laugh and cheer during the Future Leaders Conference in Galle.

"We gathered here as strangers and I was so nervous and scared to mingle with others...now when I leave [here] I'll have friends all over Sri Lanka, and we will work to discard the hate formed in this country."

*--Chandima Nishani, 17,
Anuradhapura resident*

Telling Our Story

U.S. Agency for International Development
Washington, DC 20523-1000
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June 2013 – With USAID assistance, 518 student leaders from fifty-eight schools in all twenty-five districts in Sri Lanka broke ethnic and religious divides to participate in a five-day Future Leaders Conference to Stand Up Against Hate Speech.

Inspired by guest speakers, the stories of their peers, and the examples set by the primarily female group of university students who volunteered to guide them through the conference, these youth have now returned to their schools prepared to lead their classmates to counter hate speech and ethnic and religious division.

Youth leadership is important in Sri Lanka, a country where a 30-year internal conflict left many members of its multi-ethnic population fearful of "the other". In recent months, this fear has manifested itself in attacks against Muslim individuals and businesses. The youth conference, held in the southern city of Galle, offered an opportunity to counteract this type of hateful behavior by galvanizing Sri Lanka's best hope for peace: its youth.

"I had heard about the unity formed through the Future Leaders Conference, and I didn't believe it. We gathered here as strangers and I was so nervous and scared to mingle with others...now when I leave [here] I'll have friends all over Sri Lanka, and we will work to discard the hate formed in this country," said Chandima Nishani, 17, from Anuradhapura.

Such interethnic bonds are urgently needed; many Sri Lankan youth who have grown up amidst the conflict lack friends outside their own ethnic group. These five days gave the future leaders a chance to live together, learn together, and listen to one other's stories. Now, they are able to come to their own conclusions.

Such promising leadership will have a lasting impact. "There have been political attempts to create reconciliation and we failed. The young leaders are the ones who can create this reconciliation," noted Nalliah Ashokbharan, a legal scholar who presented at the conference.

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